Benefits of School-Based Sports

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High fives. School spirit. Team pride. School-based sports programs can bring out noticeable positive reactions and behaviors in teens. But what are the deeper benefits from these programs? What are we losing when schools are forced to cut these programs?

The most extensive research has come in a report called “Relationships Between Youth Sport Participation and Selected Health Risk Behaviors from 1999 to 2007” published in the Journal of School Health. This report analyzes many different factors, including race, age, and gender, and behaviors, including eating habits, sexual activity, and drug risks. The report found that many groups experienced overall benefits, with the exception of some subgroups. Overall, the study found that advantages of sports include:

* Weight control
* Problem-solving skills
* Self-esteem
* Social competence
* Academic achievement

And sports can lead to reduced rates of:

* Juvenile arrests
* Teen pregnancies
* School dropout  (Taliaferro, 2010)

In addition to these social and emotional benefits, sports can also bring about intangible benefits to the school and community as a whole. “Sports also create important opportunities for students to contribute to the school community, which may cultivate an increased commitment to, or identification with, school and school values.” (Taliaferro, 2010)

This article will look closer at some of these benefits and how school administrators can factor these into their decisions regarding school-based sports programs.

## Health Benefits

The clearest benefits of school-based sports programs can be seen in the overall physical health of teenagers. Over the past 20 years, many studies have looked at the correlation between the rising rates of obesity and the declining funding for physical activity, whether in a gym class or after-school sports, in high schools. Young people generally get less physical activity the older they get, but if they stay involved in sports programs, they’re more likely to reap the physical benefits they otherwise would not receive. This certainly helps alleviate one of the factors that can lead to obesity.

Not only does the physical activity help obesity prevention, but that activity can lead to better eating habits. Young people involved in physical activity generally consume more fruits and vegetables, are less likely to be overweight and are more likely to become physically active adults. (Taliaferro, 2010) One good habit can lead to many good habits, so keeping young people physically active is imperative for their overall health.

## Social Benefits

Teen girls tend to see the greater social benefits of competing in team sports. The physical activity combined with the camaraderie and purpose lead to a winning combination for girls. “Girls who compete in sports get better grades, graduate at higher rates and have more confidence. The vast majority avoid unplanned pregnancies, drugs, obesity, depression and suicide.”  (Anderson, 2012)

The Taliaferro study marked a number of positive social benefits of physical activity, including less risky sexual behavior (increased condom use and fewer sexual partners) and fewer tendencies to smoke cigarettes or use marijuana or other illegal drugs. Although, these behaviors varied among racial groups and gender.

The social benefits can also lead to academic benefits. Physical activity is shown to lead to better academic performance, and when your team is performing better, on the court and in the classroom, it adds an incentive for the individual players to do better. Participating on a team or as an individual can also help young people improve problem-solving skills, which translate to better academic performance.

## Emotional Benefits

Another study in the *Journal of School Health* called “Physical Activity Behaviors and Perceived Life Satisfaction Among Public High School Adolescents” looked at high school students in South Carolina and how physical activity is linked to their overall life satisfaction. The study took into account exercise for 20 minutes, exercising in gym class, playing on a school sports team, stretching and other factors. Overall, the study found benefits of school-based sports in all groups, especially white females.

“It appears reasonable to suggest that for White females, playing on a **sport** team, especially one at **school**, appears to be protective. Playing on **sport** teams may enhance **school** connectedness, social support and bonding among friends and teammates for White females, and may have greater value compared to regular exercise. For males (Black and White) it appears that regular exercise, stretching exercises, actually exercising in PE class, and playing on a **sport** team at **school** are protective for improved quality of life (perceived life satisfaction). For males, building endurance, stretching, and strength training (White males) may be more important mentally and physically for competitive **sports** at **school** and for overall mental health.” (Valois, 2004)

It’s not just girls who reap the social, physical, and emotional benefits from exercise. Generally, it is shown that physical activity has numerous benefits to teen participants.

“A growing body of literature suggests a relationship between PA (Physical Activity) and improved mental well-being for adolescents. Participation in PA (exercise) for teens was associated with decreased anxiety and depression and improved academic performance; improved parental relationships, increased self-esteem, and decreased anger; decreased psychological stress; lower levels of mental health problems; reduced tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use; and satisfaction with mandatory gym classes in school” (Valois, 2004)

Taken the other way, not getting enough exercise, in school or otherwise, can lead to depression, anxiety, and lower interest in school and academics.

Unfortunately, physical activity decreases throughout a young person’s time in school. “Participation in vigorous physical activity for at least 20 minutes 3 days per week decreases from 69% among adolescents aged 12 to 13 years to 38% among those aged 18 to 21 years.” (Valois, 2004) This could be due to a number of factors throughout the young person’s life, but parents and teachers should continue to encourage young people to stay active to increase their quality of life.

## The Bigger Picture

How can schools best use this information? With budget cuts across the board in many school districts, administrators must make decisions that will benefit the short-term and long-term well-being of their students. If the school thinks they have to trade phys ed or sports in order to get better test scores, they may be heading down the wrong path. As we’ve seen throughout this article, “Physical activity can be added to the school curriculum without academic consequences and also can offer physical, emotional, and social benefits.” (Story, 2009) Sports programs are good for the individual and the whole.

It can be difficult for schools to make decisions regarding funding, especially when test scores decrease. But if administrators can keep the big picture in mind, and factor in how the many benefits of physical activity and sports programs can help students, the good test scores will follow. According to the Taliaferro study, “Identifying a factor, such as sport participation, that correlates with reduced involvement in multiple health risk behaviors among adolescents represents a significant contribution to health policy and practice, particularly given the limited resources available to promote positive health behaviors.” (Taliaferro, 2010) When these positive health behaviors combine with improved academic performance, as noted in the Valois study, it seems clear that educators should prioritize youth sports as a win-win situation for the school and for students.

## Works Cited

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